

Toward a Non-European Anarchism

—or—

Why a Movement is the Last Thing that *People of Color* Need

By Aragorn!

While the intention of this essay is to evoke images of an anarchism with a center of gravity outside of the Continental Tradition it will do so while also questioning anarchists' ability to live and think outside of authority. Because while the theory of a belief system opposing authority in the form of State and Capital may seem to naturally reject Eurocentric History and culture, in practice it does not. Moreover, the ability of non-white anarchists to articulate a vision (outside of the confines of either reclaiming national liberation struggles as libertarian or parroting New Left slogans as if they were not tired and trite) is still in question.

A word about language: ¹ I have chosen to italicize the term *People of Color* even though it is the most "in vogue" term to describe people of non-European descent. That is, it comes with a set of political

9. The full equation is theory plus the value of human inspiration (an easily quantifiable unit) - the value of compromises that must be made in the name of exigency (yet another quantifiable; as a log whose value will descend to zero as the value of freedom rises to infinity) = one unit of better world. Naturally X (as an accepted type of theory) multiplied by Y (the actual practice of that theory) equals the greater value of T. The full equation then reads $XY + H - C = 1$ bw

10. The worst kinds of utopian thinking are the fixation on the most impossible characteristics of a system as their cause and explanation. The modern capitalist utopian believes that competition exists and forms the foundation of the current economic system. The classic idealist utopian connects faith to the creation of a new order and develops that world based on those assumptions.

11. I went through a bit of torment before settling on the term "extra-European Anarchism". While clearly my premise is to develop an idea of an "outside of Europe" anarchism I also feel a great deal of distress at the idea of centering Europe in the language. The balance between rejection and relationship must be kept.

Notes

1. Language is a deep topic and has involved a lot of thinking on my part. It also necessitates decision-making and I make mine along several lines. I often choose to capitalize terms to invoke the possibility that they may have an "institutional" connotation that is not entirely comprehensible by real live people. Take for instance Capital. On one level we can understand a definition of capital that talks about it as the extracted value of labor under conditions where others own the means of production. Or we can understand it as a global system of the fluid exchange of money done within a political context carved out of the money holders desires. My use of capitalization is an example of the general commitment that I have to be intentional and thoughtful about my use of words.

2. Kropotkin, Pyotr (1910) *Anarchism* The Encyclopaedia Britannica
<http://www.anarchy.org/misc/britanar.html>

3. Godwin, William (1793) Political Justice and its influence on morals and happiness

4. Vaneigem, Raoul (1994) The Movement of the Free Spirit. I hate to pick on Raoul here as I take his aphorisms to be in good faith, but that does not eliminate the fact that he tends to speak of death as bad, children as good, and of a paradise lost to be reclaimed by unfettered free wills. These are nice dreams, and you see the practice of these dreams in the advocating of such things as TAZ (The Temporary Autonomous Zone), RTS (Reclaim the Streets, a brand of TAZ), Evasion (TAZ, self righteous and on the road) and the "protest hopping" that has been in vogue since the events of November 1999. I do not discourage dreaming except when dreamers believe that they are awake.

5. Bakunin, Mikhail (1871) God and the State

6. Kropotkin, Pyotr (1902) Mutual Aid

7. Adams, Jason (2002) Nonwestern Anarchisms rethinking the global context This is a complementary essay to my own. He possibly attaches the term anarchism to a variety of tendencies that may not be interested in the term but he covers the bases that need to be hit. He tells another anarchist history, about not European people, and frames the tale under the stormy sky's of the past two hundred years.

8. The Eurocentric behavior of anarchists is a slow moving target that, because of my own participation in the anarchist body, I tend to not highlight. I do not feel some sense of vindication when the "crimes" of someone are exposed, with the resulting mixture of guilt, despair, apology, and apathy. I tend to only "criticize" when I am willing to take responsibility for the caring of the criticized. This is often seen as my insistence on being correct, but is actually my attentiveness to the struggle that accused people must endure.

A history of Anarchism as an observation of individual anarchists.

The clearest origin of anarchism in the western tradition lies in ancient Greece and the argument of Zeno (the Stoic) for a society ruled by the sovereignty of the moral law of the individual.² While not specifically an anarchist position, Zeno serves as a practical counter-point to the ideal nation of Plato's Republic. In the modern, post-Enlightenment era the first treatise in defense of anarchism came from William Godwin (1793)³. He argued that government is unnecessary and harmful to the conduct of human affairs. He also believed that society could be transformed into a world of justice and equality through education and propaganda, and not through specific political struggle. His influence of anarchism as a school of thought (and not just a movement for social change) cannot be overstated. The four fathers of (European) anarchism lived in the second half of the 19th century and included Mikhail Bakunin, Peter Kropotkin, Pierre Proudhon and Max Stirner. They stand as the central figures in modern anarchist activism, anarcho-communism, mutualism, and individualism respectively. In the twentieth century such figures as Emma Goldman, known for her advocacy of contraception and free love, Sacco and Vanzetti, known for being anarchist martyr's killed by the state, and Makhno, who fought against the Bolsheviks and White armies in the Russian revolution, inform a conception of anarchism as martyrdom and activism.

This introduction to a number of anarchists is an attempt to briefly allude to the mythology of the anarchist. Not from a rejection of these particular mythologies, as, in their opposition, these are some of the most human stories that can be told, but because understanding that there are deeper stories of actual human struggle and inspiration is what an observation of individual anarchists should provide us. It is not as a result of glamorous rebels that the anarchist tradition breathes life into human experience today. But these anarchist's stories (can) exemplify the tradition without obscuring our part in it.

A history of Anarchism as the transformation of radical ideas.

While the origins of Anarchism seem most interested in the science of statecraft, anarchism has since evolved into a criticism of technology,

religion, capitalism, and the state. This evolution happened because the principles that would lead one to conclude that the state was oppressive naturally led to the conclusion that those same systems also exist in other arenas of the human experience. What are these principles? Vaneigem has described them so--

"Although each of us starts along the path as a whole, living being, intending to return just as we were when we left off, we became completely lost in a maze of wasted time, so that what returns is only a corpse of our being, mummified in its memories. The striving of humanity after survival is a saga of childhood bartered away for decrepitude." ⁴

While Vaneigem's choice of metaphors will be discussed later the principle of a "first man" runs through most libertarian literature. Bakunin in *God and the State* exemplifies the principle of contrariness.

Extra-European Anarchism would not be moral. Morality (as in the valuation of individual human behavior) is a dangerous ideology (disguised as a type of common sense) that takes much more than it gives. An amoral universe is one without poles, where North and South might be controlled by the story as told instead of the Good Book. Where there may possibly be no Good and Evil.

There is much more to be told here (the seeds have been planted) but the rest of the story can wait. Suffice it to say that placing anti-authoritarian ¹⁶ principles outside of the sphere of the Eurocentric worldview is rich with possibility. It can allow for the discussion to happen outside of the shadow of specific historical figures, it allows for the vigorous contrariness of people to be seen as a central social principle and not a problem to be fixed, and it allows for an analysis of histories of cooperation as living possibilities and not just pull quotes off of posters from the 1960's.

"The abolition of the Church and the State must be the first and

The project is to create a new way of living without the established

Extra-European Anarchism would contextualize violence as an appropriate part of the human experience. Currently violence is a problem. Not due to the violence that people are capable of inflicting on each other but due to the monopolization of violence by the state. Humans are capable of violence; capable of, interested in, repulsed by, and affected by violence. An Extra-European Anarchism would not attempt to channel violence into a specifically socially mandated form (like sports) but integrate violence into living in a way that both demystifies and spiritualizes the pain that we can inflict upon ourselves and others.

It is also important (in the context of this sketch) to discuss what an Extra-European Anarchism would NOT be.

Extra-European Anarchism would not be traditional. Tradition is a multi-headed hydra. It appears to advocate for ancient ways that have shown their use and truth through age and experience AND as an excuse for static behavior in the name of tradition. While most (if not all) cultural understandings of the world that exist today (and through our understanding of history) will live on in an Extra-European Anarchism, they will not do so because they are traditional.¹⁵ They

enjoyment of life for the individual, with the least waste of energy." ⁶

While not authoritative, most modern incantations of anarchism derive from these principles. The application and depth has evolved, but the idea that people were once free, can be again, and can do it ethically is a primary theme of the anarchist tradition.

A history of Anarchism: as failed and successful social transformation.

In practice this (social transformation) can be described as a type of activism. This happens often within larger historical movements, frequently as the action of determined individuals to transform reality, and most often as the rejection of alienated people refusing to participate in the social apparatus.

There have been a variety of movements that have had an articulated anarchistic reflection. They include the Free Spirit movement of the 13th and 14th century (scattered throughout the European Continent), where a woman is quoted as saying "I have created all things. I

Finally, in our parade of anarchistic moments, are the events of May

68 in France. When a coalition of students and workers brought the

accept the burdensome framework of the category of ideas that I am
trying to represent. As the intention of placing anarchism outside of

What does need to change is the way in which these bordered people see appropriate action. They would petition the king, rally in the courtyard, or use just about any political contrivance to assist (their perception of) "the movement". The possibility of (these more or less Machiavellian techniques) effectiveness is what attracts many non-whites. "If we can win today, it is more likely that we can win tomorrow." goes the reasoning.

This is why a movement is the last thing that *people of color* need. Not only are movement politics an explicitly European construction (with all that that implies) but the belief that as the result of some specific victory (even if that victory is at the end of a long campaign) we will get a world that reflects our values will erupt is utopian¹⁰ at best, War Machine thinking at worst.

How are movement politics specific to Europe? While a definition of movements could expand to fit just about all human behavior there is a

commitment to community (or more appropriately communitarian ideas). A few examples are in order.

The idea that a new, better society will look like X, where X is the value of anarcho-communism, anarcho-syndicalism, social-ecology, or anarcho-primitivism⁹, is classic model thinking. It has an advantage of being successful (Democracy, Fascism, Protestantism) in the eyes of History. It actually advocates "for" something (as if living (freely) were not possible without a roadmap) and doesn't just serve as negation. In this regard anarchism has everything in common with communists (and their perfect worker), libertarians (and their perfect capital), and religiousists (and their perfect god).

The media serves as no one's friend. Its portrayal of anarchists will always rely on a lens, an author, and an interpretation that (by definition) will focus on what can be seen from the outside. To the extent that we are media creatures we internalize these messages and

(as in should) reject. This makes the most successful of them barely different from a contrary politician and the rest an isolated sect with demographic limitations that also demonstrate a limited view of the world.

This is the criticism that *people of color* make of Anarchism that speaks a truth. If an idea, or a scene, does not look like you then it cannot possibly be useful or meaningful to you. While this does imply a media (visual) fixation, the criticism is still correct (even more so) if by "anarchism doesn't look like me" you are actually stating the "Representative anarchist people seem to only represent a certain (middle class, white, "counter-cultural") demographic that is not mine. Moreover, there seems to be a worldview shared among this demographic that prioritizes a set of cultural values that I do not share. Or even understand. I will even go so far as to say that these cultural values quite possibly are part of the problem."

Take for example the Morgenthau's quote (or the source of footnote 4)

be called the same name) as opposed to transforming pre-existing institutions into more humane golems. It is the anarchist tradition (not practice, but tradition) that alludes to the possibility that there may not be just one answer to the question "what should a better world look like?" It is the anarchist tradition that is possibly not universalist. This should be particularly appealing to people coming from non-European traditions and cultures. Not only is the history such that any possibility of seeing our way out of the current dilemma should be attended to but the idea that there may not be just one answer, that our specific cultural identities may inform our specific answers (and not a textbook or leader) is inspiring. Much of this has been known all along by just about everyone outside of the European tradition. Will an "enemy in the camp" allow for the possibility of "an exchange of hostages". Can an extra-European anarchism allow for the framework where people not of European descent can communicate with those on the inside? Or will an extra-European anarchism create a momentum towards itself. Where those stuck inside the walls will be left to their own devices and can leave the castle whenever they are ready to join